

Update on the Northern Ireland Peace Process

Testimony before the
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Europe and Emerging Threats

The Honorable Mitchell B. Reiss
Special Envoy of the President and the Secretary of State
for the Northern Ireland Peace Process
U.S. Department of State

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to discuss U.S. policy towards Northern Ireland and review the current status of the peace process. I have had the privilege of serving as the President's Special Envoy on this issue for the past 18 months. I am deeply grateful to members of the House and the Senate for their generosity in sharing their experience and the insights they have gained in dealing with this issue for far longer than I have. I also want to acknowledge the assistance and support of members of the Irish American community, many of whom have devoted years in support of the peace process.

America's commitment to Northern Ireland starts at the highest level. This was reaffirmed by President Bush on March 17, when he met with the Irish Prime Minister and civic leaders from Northern Ireland. On that occasion, the President said that the story of the Irish is the story of America, and that when Irish immigrants came to these shores for liberty, they ended up adding to our freedom. We are likewise committed, he said, to helping the courageous people of Northern Ireland build a stable peace and promised that the American people will stand with them.

U.S. policy on Northern Ireland enjoys bipartisan support in Washington. This support enhances our ability to achieve our objectives. These objectives are for Northern Ireland to emerge as a fully democratic, prosperous, and tolerant society that respects the rule of law, protects human rights and safeguards equality of opportunity and treatment.

Since the start of the peace process, the United States has fully supported the efforts of the British and Irish governments to negotiate a settlement to the 30-year conflict in Northern Ireland. In 1998, these efforts resulted in the Belfast Agreement, widely known as the Good Friday Agreement, which was the culmination of years of work led by former Senator George Mitchell.

The Agreement provided an innovative solution to a constitutional question: Should Northern Ireland remain within the United Kingdom or form part of the Republic of Ireland? The Good Friday Agreement affirmed that Northern Ireland's future should be determined by its own citizens in a democratic manner. The Agreement also sets forth fundamental principles of respect for human rights and the need to rely upon exclusively

peaceful and democratic means to pursue political objectives. The Agreement established an elected Northern Ireland Assembly and new institutions that recognize the unique ties that connect both halves of Ireland and that link together all the constituent parts of the islands – England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The Agreement's greatest achievement has been to provide a context for the steady evolution of this conflict away from violence and toward an exclusively political path. While this process is not yet complete, it has produced a remarkable transformation in Northern Ireland over the past several years.

The poet Seamus Heaney recalled the desolation of the Troubles as a quarter-century of "life-waste and spirit-waste, of hardening attitudes and narrowing possibilities." Instead of provoking such despair, today's Northern Ireland inspires optimism. Last year, Archbishop Sean Brady marked the tenth anniversary of the IRA cease-fire with a profoundly hopeful message about the prospects for long-term peace. The Archbishop noted that he was administering Confirmation to "children who, for the first time in several generations, have grown up free from the daily memory of killings, bombings, funerals and tears."

Life in Northern Ireland is becoming more normal. The economy has grown steadily over the past decade and the unemployment rate is now below 5 percent. According to the latest data, Northern Ireland tourism had its best year on record in 2003, with the number of visitors increasing by 12 percent. Last week in Belfast I met with business leaders and it was clear from our discussion that the people of Northern Ireland have the entrepreneurial drive to build on these successes, provided the government's role in the economy is reduced and political stability is maintained.

Policing is another success story. The Good Friday Agreement mandated the creation of the Patten Commission to recommend reforms in Northern Ireland's policing institutions. Following the Patten recommendations, 50 percent of all new police recruits now come from the Catholic community. Police Oversight Commissioner stated in his last report that the "degree of change already accomplished over a relatively short period...is both remarkable and unparalleled in the history of democratic policing reform." I can testify to that change. Last week I visited with young police officers representing both communities to hear first-hand their commitment to policing and to building a more just and fair society in Northern Ireland.

Policing in Northern Ireland is never going to be perfect – just as policing will never be perfect in any community. But due to enhanced oversight and accountability, we have already seen great progress, ensuring that those who uphold the law are not beyond it.

The Chief Constable, Hugh Orde, has been building a new force, with a new culture, grounded on the philosophy of community policing and the need to respect human rights. The Police Ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, has provided robust oversight of police effectiveness, and the cross-community Policing Board holds the police service to account. The United States has supported this transformation through exchange

programs, training and the sharing of best practices by American police officers and community leaders. These contacts have helped reinforce the central message of Patten: that policing *with* community support is the only effective and democratic way to administer law enforcement.

The political framework provided by the Good Friday Agreement, increasing economic opportunity and a police service that has the growing support of local communities have made a profound difference in Northern Ireland society. Significantly, deaths from terrorism and paramilitary crime have declined from an average of 53 per year in the 1990s to 11 per year since 2000. Last year, only four people were killed in political violence in Northern Ireland. Our overarching objective is to build a society in Northern Ireland that no longer has reason to compute these tragic statistics.

While significant progress has occurred since 1998, some problems remain. Two of the core institutions established by the Agreement, the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Executive, have been suspended since October 2002 due to disagreements about weapons decommissioning and concerns about continuing IRA activities.

Late last year we saw some progress toward resolving these problems, but a final resolution proved elusive. In September, Prime Minister Blair and the Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, proposed a comprehensive settlement in which the IRA would agree to discard all of its weapons and transition to a “new mode.” Ian Paisley’s party, the DUP, agreed to accept all of the fundamental elements of the Good Friday Agreement, including a requirement to serve in a power-sharing government with representatives of Sinn Féin.

In early December, after several weeks of negotiations, the parties refused to accept the comprehensive settlement because of a number of disagreements, the most prominent of which was whether the IRA would permit photographic evidence of weapons decommissioning.

Prospects for a settlement deteriorated further when a Belfast bank was robbed of about 26 million pounds in late December. The British and Irish governments have both stated definitively that the IRA was responsible for the crime and I have no reason to doubt that assessment. The following month, Robert McCartney was stabbed to death outside a pub in central Belfast. The McCartney family and others whom I trust believe that members of the IRA perpetrated this crime, covered up the evidence and have intimidated those who witnessed the murder. Indeed, the IRA has admitted that some of its members were involved in the murder. But this is not just about the McCartney family’s tragic loss. This is about the fundamentals of justice. In a democratic society, it is the responsibility of all citizens – and especially of elected politicians – to uphold the rule of law and cooperate with the authorities.

Mr. Chairman, U.S. policy on paramilitary activity – from both the republican and the loyalist sides – has been clear and consistent. We condemn it, unequivocally. The Good Friday Agreement provided all parties in Northern Ireland with a vehicle to pursue their

objectives through democratic, nonviolent politics and it provided a mechanism for armed groups to discard their weapons without sanctions. Seven years after concluding that Agreement, four years after 9/11, it is well past time for the remaining paramilitary groups to end violence and cease their criminal activities.

Political parties associated with private armies have no place in Irish politics in the 21st century. The Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, was emphatic on this point in a speech he gave two months ago. In voting for the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, he said, the people of Ireland “did not vote for an armed peace. Or for a criminal peace. They voted for a democratic peace. We must have closure to build that democratic peace. Closure on decommissioning. An end to all illegal activities. No more threats and no more intimidation.”

Mr. Chairman, Members of Congress have also taken leadership roles on this issue. In this regard I would like to recognize the hard work of the Friends of Ireland caucus, which includes four members of this subcommittee, Representatives King, Engel, McCotter and Wexler. In March, the Chairman of the Friends of Ireland, Representative Jim Walsh, called on the IRA to “go out of business” because its activities were “damaging the credibility of the Republican movement.” Senator Kennedy has also been outspoken, saying that “Sinn Fein and the IRA need to understand that the vast majority of Irish Americans deplore and condemn violence and criminality.”

In April, Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams also said that the time has come for Irish republicans to pursue their objectives through purely democratic and peaceful means, to no longer rely upon “armed struggle.” We welcomed this statement by Mr. Adams and are waiting to hear the response from the IRA. That response should contain actions which show conclusively that Irish republicans are fully committed to principles of non-violence regarding both paramilitary and criminal activities.

During my visit to the region last week, I met with Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, the new Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Peter Hain, the Irish Foreign Minister, Dermot Ahern, and with party leaders from the DUP, Sinn Fein, the SDLP and the UUP. Now that the Westminster elections have concluded, there is an expectation that London, Dublin and the parties will resume their political engagement and try to restore devolved government in Northern Ireland.

As always, the United States will be there to assist them. The Bush Administration remains committed to keeping this process moving in the direction of long-term peace and stability. Our role continues to be that of honest broker, impartial advisor and strong advocate for the principles of the Good Friday Agreement. As we move ahead, I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, to achieve our goals in Northern Ireland.

Thank you.